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ON THE OBLIGATION TO INTERPRET THE SCRIPTURES.

SHALL the difficulty of interpreting the Bible lead one to abandon attempts at interpreting it?

It has been said that the Sunday-school teacher, or at least the producers of lesson-helps, should not "put interpretation" upon the Bible. Evidently along with this dictum *CAN AN INTERPRETATION BE "PUT UPON" THE BIBLE?* goes the implication that there may legitimately be different interpretations of the Scripture. In fact, a teacher of the Bible is not infrequently asked whether he gives the "denominational interpretation" of the portion of Scripture he is studying. Perhaps one should not be surprised at such questions. The history of theology makes it only too evident that many men go to the Scriptures to find support for their own opinions, and such interpreters very naturally find it necessary to practice imposition as a preparation for exposition.

Bible teachers have themselves to thank for the decision of some law courts that the Bible is a sectarian book. It could hardly be otherwise if interpretations are to be "put upon" it. The phrase very well describes a method often in evidence. Interpretations have been determined in advance, and then fitted to some text, or, perhaps even more truly, the texts have been fitted to them.

It is, of course, not difficult to discover the source of such exegetical anarchy. Men have rebelled against enforced inter-

pretations, have determined to study the Scriptures for themselves, and—owing to a variety of causes—have differed as to what the Scriptures mean. Accordingly they have agreed to differ. The Bible material is to have no one interpretation.

*DANGER OF
EXEGETICAL
ANARCHY*

But is this the proper attitude to assume? Does the Bible have, conceivably, as many meanings as it has interpreters?

In our estimation nothing could be more fatal or absurd than such an opinion. There may, of course, be difficulties in obtaining the precise meaning of another's words. There may be certain passages of the Scripture which are so colored by circumstances and habits of thought long since outgrown as never to be precisely understood by the men of a later time. There may be passages which are not as plain to the unlearned man as to the scholar, or *vice versa*. But the meaning of Scripture (with the exception of here and there a passage) can be found, and finally found, by the use of proper exegetical methods. To hold the contrary view is to throw doubt on the sanity of inspiration, to put a premium on interpretative eccentricities, and to start Bible study on the road to the Kabbalah.

But it may be objected: Can we arrive at any general consensus of interpretation? We not only can do so, but in large degree have accomplished this. The Bible is not a book of riddles; the gospel was not intended to increase the uncertainties of human life; the apostles were not seeking to mystify their converts. The words of lawgiver and prophet and apostle and Christ were not intended to form the materials for a new science over which professional teachers should spend centuries and about which others should wait the latest word of scholarship. But neither were these words intended to have as many meanings as they might have hearers. They were meant to be understood, they have been understood, and they will be better understood if only our religious teachers will undertake to understand them. One danger that threatens Bible study is precisely here: men refuse to interpret—ingenuously and carefully to *interpret*—the Bible.

*POSSIBILITY OF
CONSENSUS OF
INTERPRETATION*

We are dealing here with something more fundamental than the matter of method. At bottom the question is psychological.

**THE MENTAL
ATTITUDE
OF THE
INTERPRETER**

With what attitude of mind shall the interpreter approach the Bible? Many people would reply: One must approach the Bible for the purpose of discovering the truth. On the face of it such a reply seems eminently satisfactory. Every earnest man wishes to find the truth, and every student of the Bible believes that new appreciation of revealed truth will result from the study of the Scriptures. And yet, at the same time, the answer is one which may very well be given with considerable hesitation. The interpreter who really desires to gain the truth of any piece of literature must—as an interpreter—be mentally indifferent as to whether the results of his investigations are to be considered truth or not. As an interpreter, his interests lie, not in truth as such, but in discovering what the writer whose words he is studying actually intended his readers to understand. The first duty of the interpreter is not to pronounce upon the truth, but upon the meaning of the passage he may be studying. When once such a meaning has been discovered the student may very well consider the question whether this is to be accepted as truth or not. But at that point the student ceases to be exclusively an interpreter and becomes a theologian or apologist.

Now, it is precisely as an interpreter that one must approach the Bible. Most of the discrepant meanings which have been found in the Scripture have arisen from the fact that this has not been the case—that men have desired to find in the Bible that which they would be willing to accept. They have, therefore, been seriously affected by some preconception, some belief they have held to be fundamental truth. Then, believing in the infallibility of the Scripture, they have forced the Scripture to mean that which they thought it must mean if they were to hold it true. So far has this *a priori* interpretation proceeded that it is very difficult for one addicted to its use to recognize the actual meaning of the Scripture. Many of the efforts of the best-intending men

DANGER IN

EXEGETICAL

PRESUPPOSITIONS

in biblical study have been only too obviously an attempt to save preconceptions at the expense of the clear meaning of Scripture. While professedly believing in the inspiration of the Bible, such interpreters have actually believed in their own infallibility.

In combating the results of such an interpretation one is always at a disadvantage. Few people publish their controlling preconceptions, but let their interpretation stand as apparently an outgrowth of impartial study. Their critics are accordingly working in the dark. It is always difficult to disprove unexpressed presuppositions. But, in reply, it is not necessary to disprove them. The severest objection which can be brought against any exegetical process is to make clear the fact that it is controlled by a presupposition. When this is once apparent, any amount of scholarly apparatus and the play of the keenest logic cannot avert condemnation. He whose duty it was to discover another's meaning has published a meaning that is his own and not that other's. The issue that is raised is a moral one.

There is only one safe rule for the student of the Bible, and that is to postpone all systematic and constructive and homiletic study of the Scriptures until he has mastered their precise meaning. The results of such interpretation, if only its process be strictly grammatical and historical, will be truth to which men may well square their lives. But such interpretation is not a matter of ingenuity or pious musing. It presupposes method and training. Cast in historical forms of expression and thought, the outgrowth of a civilization and of circumstances long since past, the Bible as a whole cannot be properly understood without study. Extemporaneous opinions are worth no more in biblical science than in any science. The interpreter is not a seer, he is a student. It is true that he should never arrogate to himself infallibility or authority, but it is none the less true that without his work the Bible will be imperfectly known. To belittle painstaking exegesis is to insist that the religious teacher shall give up attempts at discovering the precise meaning of Scripture. It is to belittle the Bible itself.

*THE DEMAND
FOR TRAINED
EXEGETICS*